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UNCLAS VATICAN 000181

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [IS](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: JEWISH LEADERS HAIL POPE'S EFFORTS TO BUILD  
CATHOLIC-JEWISH UNDERSTANDING AND COMBAT ANTI-SEMITISM

REF: 04 Vatican 4911

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) The largest group of Jewish leaders ever to travel to the Vatican lauded Pope John Paul II's efforts on behalf of reconciliation between Jews and Christians in a January 18 meeting. The group cited the Pope's numerous gestures toward the Jewish community as the Holy See marks the 40th anniversary of a seminal Catholic document that ushered in an era of improved relations between the two faiths. The positive publicity surrounding the meeting with the rabbis could not come at a better time for the Holy See, which has had to face another chapter in the controversy of wartime Pope Pius XII. End Summary.

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160 Rabbis Praise Pope  
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2.(U) The largest group of Jewish leaders ever to travel to the Vatican met with Pope John Paul II January 18 and conveyed their appreciation to him and the Catholic Church for all they had done to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect between Jews and Christians. It was the first time that such a large (160) and diverse group of rabbis representing all branches of Judaism from Israel, the U.S. and Europe had come together with the Holy See. A spokesman for the rabbis said much of the progress in the religious dialogue is the result of Pope John Paul's personal efforts to reach out to the Jewish community.

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Pope's Gestures Recalled  
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3.(U) In their message to the Pope, the visiting rabbis underlined his gestures of friendship and numerous initiatives connected to relations with Jews. They depicted reconciliation as the defining characteristic of his relations to the Jewish people, noting his journey to Auschwitz after his election as Pope, his denunciation of anti-Semitism as a "sin against God and humanity," his historic visit to Rome's synagogue (he was the first Pope to do so since the earliest days of Christianity), and the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the state of Israel on his watch. Israel's current ambassador to the Holy See joined the rabbis for their audience with the Pope.

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Anniversary of Nostra Aetate  
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4.(SBU) The rabbis' visit coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the Catholic Church's basic policy document on relations with Judaism. "Nostra Aetate" is widely acknowledged as having contributed significantly to enhancing Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Pope told the visiting rabbis that he hoped the anniversary would "be an occasion for renewed commitment to increased understanding and cooperation in the service of building a world ever more firmly based on respect for the divine image in every human being." Norbert Hofmann, the Secretary of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (and a 2005 International Visitor Program recipient) was very enthusiastic following the event, and told us the anniversary was a perfect way for the Catholic Church to emphasize the new directions relations had taken in recent decades. "Now we need continue looking forward," he concluded.

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Comment  
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5.(SBU) The January 18 meeting with Jewish leaders

represented a continuation of a series of meetings between the Pope and Jewish groups that have given new impetus to the religious dialogue and offered an occasion for recognition of the Pope's personal efforts to reconcile Catholics and Jews (reftel). In fact, the Pope's success in improving this sensitive religious and political relationship will almost certainly be regarded as one of the most enduring aspects of his legacy.

16. (SBU) The positive publicity surrounding this most recent meeting could not have come at a more propitious time for the Holy See, which has been defending itself against another series of allegations regarding the Church's actions during and after WWII. In this case, an Italian newspaper alleged that the Vatican demonstrated insensitivity over the post-war custody and education of Jewish children saved from the Holocaust by being baptized and sheltered in Church institutions. (Media reports and analysis emailed to EUR/WE and EUR/OHI). The Holy See has denied the allegations, and the evidence presented against it is somewhat suspect. For his part, Hofmann called the flap a "non-issue" and insisted that it did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the January 18 meeting. Still, the controversy reinforces the importance of current Vatican efforts to build bridges and overcome lingering resentments from the past. End comment.

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